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The Older Adult

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Sleeping Pills

Tranquillizers

Pain Medications



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What are Depressant Drugs?



Sleeping pills, tranquillizers and pain medications are depressant drugs. Some antihistamines, cough and cold medications and alcohol are also **depressant** drugs.

Some people use these drugs to cope with stresses such as loneliness, sleeping problems, pain, anxiety and fears about the future. These drugs **depress** the nervous system and slow people down. They need to be used carefully by older adults.

Depressant drugs may be prescribed or sold over-the-counter. They are not to be confused with **anti-depressant** drugs, which have different or opposite effects.

Depressant Drugs Can Cause Problems



As you age, you become more sensitive to depressant drugs. Drugs stay in your body longer and have a stronger effect. “Less is best” is a good guideline for older adults who use tranquilizers, sleeping pills, pain medications or other depressants.

Most depressant drugs should only be taken for a short time: two weeks to two months, depending on the drug. However, there are some conditions that may require the use of these drugs over a longer period of time. Ask your doctor how long to take them.

With prolonged use of some of these medications, you may need more of the drug to get the original effect. When you stop using the drug, you may experience

undesirable withdrawal effects. You may not feel physically or emotionally well for a short time.

Combining drugs may also cause a problem. If you take two or more depressant drugs at the same time – such as a glass of wine with a sleeping pill, or a beer with a decongestant – it can increase the effect of each drug or produce unintended side effects.

Depressant drugs can have side effects that may be confused with signs of aging.





Some side effects of using depressants, or combinations of depressant drugs, include:

- ◆ unsteadiness or falling
- ◆ feeling confused or not being able to concentrate
- ◆ drowsiness or daytime sleeping
- ◆ poor memory
- ◆ difficulty breathing
- ◆ dizziness
- ◆ nausea or vomiting
- ◆ headaches
- ◆ constipation
- ◆ changes in heart rate
- ◆ irritability
- ◆ feeling jittery
- ◆ feeling down or “blue”
- ◆ loss of consciousness.

Taking depressant drugs over a long period of time, or increasing the amount you take to feel okay, can cause problems. For example, you can lose touch with family and friends or have conflicts with them. You may not eat properly or neglect yourself or your home.

If you notice any of these problems, talk to your doctor, pharmacist or another health professional.



Guidelines for Appropriate Depressant Drug Use

- ◆ Be informed. Know what drug you're using, how often you should use it and for how long. If you have any questions, ask your doctor or pharmacist.
- ◆ If a non-drug alternative is not possible, remember: less is best. Ask your doctor for the minimum effective dosage and whether you need to take the drug every day.
- ◆ Ask your doctor or pharmacist whether activities such as driving a car, using power tools, household appliances or other machinery can be done safely while using depressant drugs.
- ◆ Ask your doctor or pharmacist whether it's safe to use alcohol with any medication you're taking.
- ◆ Make a note of any undesirable changes or side effects you have after you start



using a drug, such as dizziness, confusion or constipation. They may be caused by the drug. Check this with your doctor or pharmacist.

- ◆ Don't automatically repeat a prescription; talk to your doctor or pharmacist first.
- ◆ Take all your prescription and over-the-counter medications with you when you visit your doctor and make sure that all the doctors you see know about all the drugs you're taking.
- ◆ Use the same pharmacy to fill all your prescriptions.
- ◆ Ask your local pharmacy, health unit or health clinic how to dispose of your old medications in a way that won't harm the environment.



Alternatives



You can manage your affairs more easily and enjoy life with appropriate use of medications or alcohol. Here are some healthy alternatives to help you sleep, deal with pain, overcome stress or cope with loneliness.



When you can't sleep

- ◆ make your bedroom more comfortable
- ◆ treat yourself to a warm bath
- ◆ have a glass of warm milk
- ◆ avoid caffeine, other stimulants or spicy foods after 4 p.m.
- ◆ avoid alcohol in the evening
- ◆ get up and do something until you feel sleepy
- ◆ avoid regular daytime napping
- ◆ listen to relaxing music.

When you feel anxious or tense

- ◆ try moderate exercise





- ◆ talk with a friend
- ◆ do relaxation exercises
- ◆ play your favorite music
- ◆ start a flower garden.

When you have a cold or stuffy nose

- ◆ drink lots of fluids
- ◆ rest
- ◆ use extra pillows to keep your head up
- ◆ gargle with warm salt water for a sore throat
- ◆ increase the humidity in your home.

When you are in pain

- ◆ try exercise, massage, or cold or hot compresses to help reduce some types of pain
- ◆ ask your doctor about non-drug treatments.





When you feel lonely

- ◆ go where there are people
- ◆ phone a friend or write a letter
- ◆ become a volunteer – you have a lot to offer
- ◆ pursue a hobby or take a class.

To stay healthy

- ◆ be active – enjoy the outdoors
- ◆ go for a walk, keep a garden, golf or swim
- ◆ learn some stretching exercises
- ◆ join an exercise class
- ◆ mall-walk with a friend
- ◆ practise deep breathing with music you enjoy



- ◆ drink lots of water (up to eight glasses a day)
- ◆ eat less fat, sugars, fast food and meats, and eat more whole grain products, vegetables and fruits
- ◆ try herbal teas, hot water with lemon, or fruit juices, instead of coffee, tea and cola
- ◆ have a friend over to share good and bad times and to talk things over
- ◆ if life is getting you down, talk with a family member, religious leader, counsellor or friend
- ◆ focus on your accomplishments and the good things in your life.



**IN YOUR LATER YEARS,
YOUR HEALTH CAN DETERMINE
WHAT YOU CAN DO,
SO STAY HEALTHY.**

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